

# TEACHERS IN HISTORY

## W. Robert Houston

In antiquity, the middle ages, and up until the mid-1800s in the United States, teachers were almost entirely men. That has changed in the last 100 years; only 30% of teachers are males, and those teach primarily in secondary schools.

The public's appraisal of teachers has reflected their perception of the relevance and effectiveness of teachers' contribution to the future of society. While never well paid, in some periods of history, teachers have been highly honored and respected, while at other times, scorned for their ineffectiveness – a roller-coaster ride with crests and valleys that ushered in new modes of education.

Teachers have been held accountable by those funding them. In ancient Athens, teachers were accountable to the parents of children they were tutoring; monks and priests were accountable to the church in the middle ages; teachers in America by a school board representing their communities. The state and federal governments are increasingly holding schools and teachers accountable for student achievement through legislation, such as *No Child Left Behind* (2001). While the specific regulations will be changed in future years, the trend toward accountability for student learning is likely to define teacher competence, characteristics, and compensation for years to come.

Throughout history, teachers and teaching have tended to reflect the culture and needs of the society in which they were located. In Athens, boys were taught to be productive citizens while in Sparta, the emphasis was on military prowess; Chinese education emphasized the literature of the great philosophers Confucius and Lao-tse.

During the Middle Ages the emphasis was on promulgating religious ideals, and in twenty-first century America, content knowledge and skills have become paramount. Education was and is inseparable from culture and its historic period, is deeply buried in the technology of that period, and is radically transformed when that culture changes.

Expectations of teachers reflect their culture – the extent of their knowledge and skills, their status in the community, and their moral dispositions. In different centuries and different environments, teachers had strong military experience, dexterous writing skills, were philosophically oriented, or exhibited a broad knowledge of history or mathematics. Some were required to be priests or novices training for the priesthood, others male, and others slaves or poor but educated (Houston, 1990).

In primitive societies, education focused on children learning the mores and practical skills of their tribes by imitating their elders. The curriculum was life experiences and the future of the tribe depended on carrying on traditions that had been successful in the past. There were no formal schools, no teachers; everyone in the village was a “teacher” and children learned by doing. Not all peoples in the world evolved at the same pace; we have learned about the education of ancient peoples in the past century through the observations of primitive societies by trained anthropologists.

## **Two Environments for Teaching**

As civilizations developed and the knowledge/skills base of society became more complex, education became more important. Teachers have functioned in two basic environments: instructing a single person or teaching a group or class of persons.

Throughout history, parents have been their children’s first teachers, initiating them into the culture of their tribe or community. Individual instruction occurred in early civilizations such as Greece, Rome, and Mesopotamia as wealthy citizens engaged slaves or employed poor but educated citizens as tutors to teach their children.

By the middle ages, the apprenticeship system had become the major approach to staffing trades and preparing future craftsmen. An apprentice learned a trade on the job by working for a master craftsman. Master craftsmen taught apprentices by showing them what to do then observing and correcting them. Apprentices first engaged in menial tasks, extending their skills as they became more proficient and the master craftsman gained greater faith in their ability, until they were able to ply their craft independently as artists, jewelers, painters, blacksmiths, wagon makers, or chefs. In the Twenty-first Century, tutors or mentors work with individuals in the workplace, community centers, schools or the home, providing individualized instruction.

The second and more traditional environment for teaching involves a group of students. As civilization began to develop, some parents wanted their children to have knowledge and skills beyond that of peasants, servants, and the “common people.” From the early stages of Chinese, Greek and Egyptian civilization, some members of society have been designated as teachers, but their responsibilities, status in the community, remuneration, and teaching assignments have varied widely and evolved throughout history. The evolution to what teachers are today forms the major part of this essay.

## **Education and Culture**

Although Athens and Sparta spoke the same language and were geographically close together, their culture, values, educational system and teachers were very different in 500–300 BCE. The purpose of Athenian education was to prepare boys as citizens who were trained in the arts. Girls were not educated in a school, but many learned to read and write at home. From ages 6 to 14, boys attended a nearby primary school.

Books were rare so teachers read passages, then the students repeated the passages until they were memorized. Teachers taught two subjects: the works of Homer and how to play the lyre. Teachers also could choose to teach other subjects (e.g., drama, art, reading, writing, math, public speaking).

Sparta and Spartan education was very different. The city-state was militaristic and the purpose of education was to develop a well-drilled, well-disciplined army. Boys entered a military school at age 6 or 7, living in a barracks with other boys. School was designed to develop skills needed by soldiers, and while they learned to read and write, those subjects were less important. By the age of 18–20, they were required to pass a rigorous test of their physical fitness, military knowledge and skills, and leadership. Their teachers were men with military experience who lived with them, even if the teachers were married and had families. Life for teachers was focused on developing a military force.

Throughout history, practices of the past have been embedded in current practice. As mediaeval civilization became increasingly more complex, teaching methods and educational institutions developed of a “different and highly original kind. Yet even at the height of the thirteenth century the memory of the ancient models, and a desire to imitate them, continually haunted the minds of the men of the time.... But above all it was the Renaissance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries which left its mark on our education by its conscious, intentional return to the strict classical tradition. Today, to a much greater extent than is commonly realized, we are still living on the humanist heritage” (Marrou, 1956, p. xii).

## **Influence of Gender on Teaching as a Lifetime Profession**

Teachers initially were males, whether they taught as slaves or free men in Athens in 400BCE or were priests teaching young men studying to enter the priesthood in the Middle Ages. Until the late nineteenth century, teaching was considered a part-time and short-term job. Young Greek teachers accepted employment as teachers or tutors for a few years until they were able to establish themselves in their lifetime career. Women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries taught for a few years before marriage and children – teaching was considered “insurance” against future disasters (e.g., death or severe injury to spouse; economic problems). Because the school year was defined by the agricultural calendar, it was primarily a winter activity, and considered to be temporary work. Fewer than 5 % of teachers taught more than 5 years.

By the mid-1800s in the United States, women had become the predominant teacher group as the men worked in fields and factories or during the American Civil War, served in the military. By 1888, 63 % of teachers in America were female, primarily adolescents and young women. Laura Ingles Wilder represents many teachers at the turn of the Twentieth Century; at age 15, she had completed the eighth grade, passed an oral test of knowledge, and taught math and reading to the children in their community while living with a school board member (Wilder, 1941).

During the Nineteenth Century, women turned to teaching as their only viable vocation other than nursing and marriage. One-in-five Massachusetts teachers taught

at some time in their lives (Altenbaugh, 1992, p. 9). The ready availability of females as teachers resulted in an oversupply of teachers that greatly depressed salaries, resulting in reduced local school district costs.

In metropolitan areas, schools were structured primarily using the industrial model, with women teaching classes in primary and elementary schools, and students progressing from grade to grade to graduation. Men taught in high schools, were paid higher wages, and were preferred by Town Councils that considered them more effective (Altenbaugh, 1992, p. 8).

Beginning in the 1930s, males made up only about 30% of the teaching force, a ratio that has remained constant for the last 75 years (Clifford, 1989; Sedlak & Schlossman, 1986). Educational preparation became more rigorous, school calendars extended, salaries increased although still low, professional associations such as the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers strengthened, and teachers began considering themselves members of a profession.

While many teachers still have second jobs during the school year and full-time employment during the summer, teachers considered themselves “teachers.” Of the 3.2 million public school teachers in 2003–2004 in the United States, 84% remained at the same school, 8% moved to a different school, and 8% left the profession during the following year (Marvel, Lyter, Peitola, Strizek, & Morton, 2007, p. 7). Those teachers younger than 30 were more likely to leave their position; 15% moved to another school and 9% left teaching (Marvel, Lyter, Peitola, Strizek, & Morton, 2007, pp. 8–10).

## Every Hundred Years...

The responsibilities and background of teachers changes with the needs of society. Teachers in Greece and Rome differed from those of the middle ages in their backgrounds, motivation to teach, processes of instructing students, and organizational unit in which education transpired. Teachers over the past three hundred have continued to be impacted by societal, political, and industrial changes.

Since the American Revolution in 1776, education has experienced three major transitions around the turn of each century (Parkerson & Parkerson, 2001). Each was triggered by dramatic changes in the social, political, and economic conditions that characterized America. Each was preceded by intense criticism of teachers and schools, led to major changes in schooling, and emerged with increased support by the public.

The first transition was triggered by the American Revolution, occurred around 1800, and promoted the values of patriotic nationalism, competition and achievement. By the mid-1800s, universal public education through the *common school* movement had expanded schooling to a much greater proportion of the population, greatly increasing the number of teachers needed.

The industrial revolution and urbanization of the nation by the end of the nineteenth century changed education to the *graded school*, based on the factory assembly line and the corporate model for management. Teachers were criticized for their lack of education and understanding of the industrial model. Schools were reorganized to reflect industry,

with grades, standard textbooks, and specialized teachers. Teachers were required to attend “normal schools” to be properly prepared to deliver the appropriate curriculum in the appropriate manner.

As the Twentieth Century drew to a close, teachers and schools were criticized because students were not performing as well on standardized tests of knowledge as those in other developed countries. Standards were implemented for both students and teachers, who were required to pass tests for graduation or certification. Schools began to be evaluated on the basis of the proportion of their students passing state achievement tests in mathematics, reading, and other content areas. The validity of the formal graded school and its program was questioned because of the number of school dropouts and low levels of achievement.

Charter schools and alternative teacher education programs were promoted and based on a wide range of ideas and conceptual models of education. *Flexibility* became the basic descriptor of schools and teachers in this third transition. Traditional schools redesigned their organization with multiple curricular choices and smaller units in larger schools, longer periods of instruction each week, and teachers certified on the basis of tested knowledge of content.

## **Teachers and the Evolution of Technology and Communication**

Effective teachers draw on the most advanced technology and communication tools available to them. For the most primitive tribes, this entailed demonstrating a skill they expected the younger generation to master. Children and youth practiced the skill over and over until its mastery was assured. These included hunting and fishing, cultivating the soil, building shelters, and defending oneself from enemies – survival strategies passed from one generation to the next. While initial education was by parents, the tribe served as teacher for survival of the community depended upon the knowledge and skills of subsequent generations. Stories and fables became the accepted media for teaching the young about their history as the oral tradition became more widespread.

About 3000 BCE, written languages were developed in the Middle East and India. Cuneiform and clay tablets in Mesopotamia, papyrus in Egypt, and parchment in Rome not only extended the importance and use of visual records, but also expanded the teachers’ responsibility and needed expertise. Boys from privileged families and priests were taught to read and write so as to be able to keep records of laws, religious beliefs, and business transactions.

Instruction was simple and direct. The teacher first taught his students how to hold writing instruments (stylus or calamus) correctly and how to construct elementary symbols, then he gave them a model to copy and reproduce. The work was simple in the beginning, but gradually became more complex. Students memorized long passages from their books by repeating them over and over. Oral instruction complemented written exercises; the teacher read a text, commented on it, and then questioned students about it.

With the advent of the printing press in the Middle Ages, written documents became more widely available, and reading and writing not only were critical for

teachers, but became basic skills taught to children and youth. The textbook became the central focus of education, with the teacher clarifying content in texts. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the most common media was the blackboard and, a 100 years later, the “white board.” By the end of the twentieth century, technology based on electronic innovations became more available and standard in schools (e.g., computers, electronic games, distance learning, and communication systems).

Tools of a teacher evolved from oral traditions to textbooks and blackboards, to films and slide tapes, to laptop computers, worldwide web, television and instant world communication, digital cameras, and multimedia training devices. With each evolution, the roles of teachers, their relations with the world and their students, and the specificity and complexity of standards used to define their responsibilities became more rigorous and specific. Teachers have tended to be more effective when they use the most modern technology (whether oral ballads or laptop computers).

### *Effects of Accountability on Teachers*

In ancient times, teachers or tutors were employed by families to educate their children. All were accountable to the family whose children they were teaching. The master of the household could fire an unsuccessful tutor or send a slave to work in the fields, work as a manual laborer, or serve in the army if they were ineffective teachers. Teacher accountability was individualized and specific.

As education became more commonplace, the community began to employ teachers; and teachers became accountable to them, typically through a board representing the city or village. With the American Constitution, each state was responsible for educating its children and implementing criteria for certifying teachers. Institutions (universities, school districts, and private agencies) were commissioned and authorized to prepare teachers by each state, but final authority for certification rested with the state. Criteria for certification have become more structured, specific, and rigorous as the number of students increased, school systems became more remote from the people they served, and as preparation programs were criticized for the quality of their preparation.

States tightened their requirements for teacher certification, including requiring bachelors’ degrees by the early 1950s in all states and masters degrees in some. In 2001, Congress passed *No Child Left Behind* legislation that specified that all children deserved a quality education and held schools and their teachers responsible for educating *all* children in America. *Education Week* concluded that secondary students in high poverty schools were twice as likely as those in low-poverty schools (26% vs. 13%) to have a teacher who was not certified in the subject taught (*Education Week*, 2003). Criteria shifted from process indicators of quality teaching to the outcomes of teaching, from number of hours of college courses to passing state-mandated achievement tests, from a broad-based school curriculum to one focused on math, reading and language, and academic content fields such as science and history. The number and proportion of music, art, and business teachers decreased as a result. As results of state achievement tests for each school are reported in newspapers and school effectiveness judged on the basis of test results, teachers spend more time on the specific content areas being tested and more energy on drill with test formats.

## Importance of Content Knowledge

The evolution of teachers is not a linear path, but a twisted road. Through the centuries, knowledge was lost or forgotten, only to be rediscovered centuries later. Algebra and the zero were reintroduced by scholars from the Middle East (as well as the Hindu-Arabic numeral system that replaced Roman numerals); copies of scriptures by Irish monks expanded and corrected Biblical passages; scientific principles such as the earth orbiting the sun – all lost at one point were rediscovered centuries later. During the Middle Ages, as decadence and barbarism characterized Western society, few scholars survived, and teachers who had mastered the mysterious secret of reading and writing became influential and sought after.

The emphasis in schools and on teachers has shifted with political and world events as well as scientific and cultural discoveries. Patriotism becomes more important in war time; science when another nation makes remarkable progress (e.g., Russian satellite, Sputnik, in 1957); following a major disaster or important event (e.g., World Trade Center disaster on 9/11; presidential election); and increased attention to achievement test scores and school accountability (e.g., global economy and international mathematics achievement). With each shift in emphasis on education, (e.g., need for well-trained priests in the Middle Ages, humanitarians and Greek scholars in the Renaissance, and content specialists today), needed teacher expertise and experience has shifted its emphasis.

From about 500–1000 AD, many teachers taught upper-class young men the manners of court, how to ride horses, and how to fight to prepare them as knights. Other teachers were monks in parish churches or monasteries. They taught church music and reading and writing Latin to prospective priests. Lower class boys were apprenticed to a master craftsman.

The European Renaissance led to a desire for a well-rounded education, including humanities, classical Greek and Latin. European schools continue this tradition to this day, and teachers are assigned to schools based on their knowledge of humanities and science.

Three recent Congressional acts have profoundly affected the character and quality of teachers in the United States. In 1944, the GI Bill of Rights encouraged returning servicemen to attend college and paid them to do so. Thousands of men and women who otherwise might not have sought higher education did so, and many became teachers. In 1958, Congress passed the National Defense Education Act to provide funds to promote science, mathematics, and foreign language instruction. In 2001, the *No Child Left Behind* act defined the population to be educated as *everyone*, and held teachers and schools accountable for accomplishing this mandate.

Such legislative actions are embedded in “this nation’s ambivalent regard for its teachers. On the one hand, we go to the outer reaches of oratorical excess in heaping praise on the Teacher of the Year.... On the other hand, only parents of first-generation college students rather consistently view teaching as a proper career for their offspring. Many other people regard teaching as a noble calling – for somebody else” (Goodlad, 1990, pp. 69–70).

## Expanded Employment by Teachers

As society and technology have become more complex, the educational needs of people have increased. No longer is an elementary or high school education sufficient. Businesses and industries sponsor advanced seminars to educate their employees, even those with doctoral degrees, to keep their knowledge and skills current in a rapidly changing “knowledge-intensive” society. These agencies provide a new and expanding role for teachers. No longer is a “teacher” automatically assumed to be employed by a school or university; now, many work with adults in human resources departments, private educational companies, and governmental offices (Houston, 1986). In 1983, the number of full-time corporate teachers in the United States was 213,000 with an additional 786,000 engaged part-time (Zemke, 1983). Many of these had previously taught in public or private schools, a year after they resigned from a school, 29% of former teachers were still employed in the field of education but not in a public school and 12% were working in an occupation outside the field of education (Marvel et al., 2007, p. 15).

Because education is so vital for continued advancements in the global, technology-rich era of the Twenty-first Century, the numbers of teachers are increasing at the same time their roles and teaching strategies are changing, becoming more complex and specialized, and expanding.

## Biographical Note

**W. Robert Houston** is John and Rebecca Moores Professor and Executive Director, the Institute for Urban Education at the University of Houston. His major contributions have been in teacher education, most notably in competency-based teacher education in the 1970s and 1980s. Author of over 43 books and hundreds of journal articles and research papers, he was Editor of the first *Handbook of Research in Teacher Education*, named the outstanding book in teacher education in 1990. In 1997 the Association of Teacher Educators named him the first *Distinguished Educator of the Year* and in 2002, he received the prestigious *Pomeroy Award* from the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education for his contributions to education. Prior to joining the faculty of the University of Houston, he was a teacher and elementary school principal, earned the doctorate at The University of Texas-Austin, and was on the faculty of Michigan State University.

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